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# Modern Philology

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## STUDIES IN BALZAC

### III. HIS GENERAL METHOD<sup>1</sup>

Probably the most severe indictment ever penned against the author of the *Comédie humaine* is that, if Parisian society were half as bad as he represents, it must long ago have ceased to exist.<sup>2</sup> But Paris is still there—and so is the *Comédie humaine*. The indictment mentioned is simply one variation of the usual Anglo-Saxon protest against the depiction—with a certain artistic heightening—of malodorous or sinister realities. I say “artistic” designedly, knowing well that many people see in Balzac only a clouded mirror of “the flux,” a world that is without form and frequently void. Yet it is possible to demonstrate that in technique at least the Frenchman knew perfectly well what he was about.

The present writer has believed for some time that the apparent naturalistic welter of Balzac really flows along lines of a set pattern. As in Mr. James’s story, there is a “figure in the carpet,” though here the design is not so recondite. Above all other novelists, Balzac created his own world—or half-world—and culminating in his own *recherche de l’absolu*, he has his own cosmology. We can trace the lines of this through people and landscapes, slums and *châteaux* and whole sociologies, to an apex whose vertiginous lure I will not anticipate. To his uncanny force and knowledge, Honoré de Balzac

<sup>1</sup> Previous studies in this series can be found in *Modern Philology*, August, 1915, and November, 1918.

<sup>2</sup> L. Stephen, *Hours in a Library* (2d ed.), I, 299–348.

certainly adds conscious method, and the two mainsprings of his method are *accumulation* and *harmony*.

In description, character, and plot the novelist accumulates his points along a given line; everywhere he harmonizes his data to accord with a definite keynote, a central unifying trait. Let us choose, in each field, a few instances out of hundreds.

With regard to the description of persons, M. Emile Faguet<sup>1</sup> has recently shown how the denizens of the famous *pension* in *Le Père Goriot* are described in terms of one main characteristic, reinforced by the mass of the details. For example: the villain Vautrin is a sinister (*inquiétant*) individual, as evidenced by his disturbing gaiety, his strength, his familiarity with locks and with women, his penetrating and profound gaze. Old Goriot himself, the modern Lear, is the incarnation of "moral and physical wretchedness," which formula is concretely detailed through several pages: it is also, incidentally, the commonest keynote, whether for persons or places, in the *Comédie humaine*.

Similar illustrations of cumulative harmony, in personal description, may be found in every Balzacian novel. César Birotteau is throughout a large, naïve, sanguine son of a peasant. His physique and costume are presented in terms of size, from his abundant head of hair, through his big back, to his coarse extremities—and even to those of his daughter. "The costume he had adopted *agreed with* his manners and physiognomy"; size is still the keynote, and his large white muslin cravat is the characteristic detail. The miser, Gobseck, is on the other hand appropriately done in shades of reduction and smallness; lips, eyes, hair, and voice are consistently lessened, while his nose glides away almost to a vanishing-point; his speech, his apartment, and his actions are cautiously narrowed and controlled. Madame de Mortsauf, in *Le Lys dans la vallée*, is, like that lily, symbolically white in person and in costume; the word *blanche* is repeated not unlike a Wagnerian *motif*.

One special feature of this synthesizing which well illustrates the author's conscious purpose is the use of what may be called animalism. In his *Avant-propos*, Balzac semi-scientifically stressed the analogies which he saw between people and animals, but the extent to which

<sup>1</sup> Balzac (*Grands Ecrivains Français*), 1913.

he carried this idea into practice has hardly been sufficiently observed. For instance, Marche-à-Terre, the Breton peasant in *Les Chouans*, is spoken of some fifty times as a kind of animal; and the madwoman in *Adieu*, reverting to nature, is again and again likened to bird or beast—over a dozen times in all. There are cases where this kind of keynote is made the dominant of an entire story. *Une Passion dans le désert* reposes for its whole cumulative effect on the sustained and jarring metaphor by which a panther is throughout presented as a woman.

Similarly, *Le Colonel Chabert* offers, though not in the direction of animalism, another case of a sustained keynote, which, proceeding from personal description, dominates a character as well as a story. Perhaps here it will be best to show how the details mass, item by item, before the reader's eyes. It is the Enoch Arden type of story, with the difference that the unscrupulous wife will not acknowledge the returning soldier as her husband.

The very first sentence—"Allons, encore notre vieux carrick!"—indicates that the colonel wears an old-fashioned cloak. Before the clerks of the lawyer Derville, he has a humility of gesture, a forced smile which fades away, and his mien is regularly qualified as "impassive, immobile." One of the clerks significantly remarks that "he looks like a corpse," and another says that he has a *fameux crâne*, which is either skull or headpiece. In response to the question, "Are you the colonel who died at Eylau?" Chabert answers: "The same."

At the lawyer's house the old soldier again evinces that stupidity of expression, that immobility which completes the *ensemble* of a *spectacle surnaturel*. His description includes a lean figure, a mysterious brow, a glazed eye, a livid countenance which "seemed dead." His body is partly in the shadow, producing the effect of a silhouette, together with a total absence of color, movement, warmth. His mutilated skull suggests that his brain escaped through the scar, and again he answers that he is "the man who died at Eylau."

All this indicates the keynote of the colonel. He is a *revenant* in both senses—a ghost who presently admits to his wife that it was a mistake to come back. The later action of the story reinforces this idea of a man who is now inept for life. In spite of a momentary

flicker induced by the lawyer's encouragement, he shows in his submission to his wife's wiles, his sequestration, his subsequent misfortunes and imbecility, an increasing fecklessness and estrangement from the ways of the world. The conclusion is identical with Der-ville's suggestion: "Let him stay dead!"

Balzac's descriptions of place often develop similarly from a definite central idea. Repeated illustrations can be found in any story. The atmosphere of mystery in *La grande Bretèche*—a companion piece to Poe's *Cask of Amontillado*—of ruin in the castle of La Vivetière, of "loudness" in the red parlor of the Rogrons, of meanness in the yellow parlor of Mlle Gamard, are cases in point; in each the items are co-ordinated to one clear result. There is the wistful charm of the Loire Valley, always described as the proper setting for its lily. There is the description of the Pons collection around the keynote of magnificence. There is the note of disorder, as frequently found in the offices of lawyers and the like. In such passages, *résumés*, repetitions of the motive and of appropriate adjectives are cannily used to drive the point home. Between places, as between persons, the device of set contrast is not uncommon.

The treatment of character in the large moves along the line chosen for the physical portrait. The latter is usually made the basis for an elaborate scaffolding of moral and environmental data, all piled up according to one principle of ruling symmetry. No expressions occur more often in Balzac than the phrase *en harmonie* and the verb *s'accorder*. The details of Madame Vauquer's person "are in harmony with that dining-room which oozes misfortune." The atmosphere of her boarding-house is denoted by the repetition of such words as *malheurs* and *misère*, which recur throughout, just as "blood" and "fear" form the scarlet thread that runs through *Macbeth*. Therefore the mistress is made to "explain the *pension*, as the *pension* implies her person." Her old woolen skirt sums up the various rooms, "announces the kitchen, and gives you a guess at the boarders." French logic will not shrink before this Ultima Thule of ratiocination. Workings of the same spirit can be found in Boileau, in Voltaire, and especially in Hippolyte Taine.

The latter's great article on Balzac (1858)<sup>1</sup> has been a main factor in the fame of both men, partly because Taine's own method would

<sup>1</sup> Republished in the *Nouveaux Essais de critique et d'histoire*, 1865.

dispose him to the appreciation of Balzac's. The historian accumulates his points in a definite direction, uses his conclusion as *motif*, and parallels the keynote in character by what he calls the *faculté maîtresse* of a man or period. The objections to such systematizing have been abundantly made; just here we are interested rather in the critic's account of the novelist's procedure. He began, says Taine, not like an artist, but like a *savant*. Balzac would first examine and record all externals: the character's town, his street, and his house; the façade, structure and general appearance of the house would come next; then the distribution of apartments, with the furniture and finishing of various rooms. The clothes of each character would be detailed in connection with his anatomy, we are told the size and appearance of each feature, and the total effect is substantiated by individual gestures and marks. The history of a person would include his origin, ideas, habits, particularly his financial position; we learn his *milieu* and his tastes. Then only, after indorsing the reports of many specialists, did the scrupulous artist let his imagination take fire from the mass of documents.

There may be two opinions as to where the creative fire began with Balzac, but there can be no doubt as to the "incomparable solidity" attained by this progression. The exposition of *Le Père Goriot* falls mainly in the line of the above analysis, and still more evidently does *Eugénie Grandet*, which, point by point, might have served as Taine's model. In this novel the general keynote is melancholy, starting in the streets of Saumur, passing through Grandet's house, ending in the heart of Eugénie. The intensive force of the method, its *vraisemblance* rather than its whole truth, constitutes its justification; also it is only by some such natural selection that the characters can be made to rise up above the mass of their material surroundings.

More in detail, one may see the harmonizing and accumulative process applied to a person's name, to his dress and physique, to his gestures, voice and speech, to every *tic* and "gag," and usually to his psychology and actions, if he be truly alive.

As to names, César Birotteau is so called because his first name implies his *grandeur et élécadence* and his last name is connotative of his character. Grandet means the "little great man." In *Le Curé de Tours*, Balzac discusses the name of the Marquise de Listomère, whose

suggestive syllables he would have accord with Sterne's *cognomologie*. There is a whole group of people whose names end in "ot," and these are generally of the Parisian *bourgeoisie*, of definite pursuits and standing.

As regards costume, apart from Chabert's *carrick*, we have the case of one old woman's plumes, her *barbes*, which serve to express her would-be stateliness. The *spencer* of Cousin Pons gives us at once his keynote; he, like the colonel, wears an old-fashioned coat because he is an *homme-empire*, out of date, doomed to misfortune.

The matter of gestures, looks, physiognomy, is to Balzac of paramount importance. Inspired by Gall and Lavater,<sup>1</sup> he consistently makes every physical attribute revealing. The accumulation of significant gestures in the *Comédie humaine* would astound a Neapolitan. Whether from vivacious southerners or languid ladies, they have a wealth of specific meaning. "Un de ces regards" is a favorite phrase. The penetrating glance of Vautrin or of Gobseck is mentioned over and over to express the character and impress the beholder. The exchange of glances is frequently the *coup de foudre*, which starts love at first sight. The stoical mask of such an old Roman as Pillerrault is no less informing than the yellow bilious complexions of half a dozen villains. The acme of this process seems to be reached when the short thick neck of Michu, in *Une Ténébreuse affaire*, is made prophetic of the guillotine.

The *tic*, or small physical mania, and the "gag," used quite in the manner of Dickens, are similarly employed and multiplied. The childishly vain César perpetually rises on tiptoe and repeats his phrase about the Legion of Honor and the steps of Saint-Roch; while Crevel, the old dandy, strikes his Napoleonic pose throughout *La Cousine Bette*. Grandet has a habit of stammering, not as an infirmity, but in order to practice on the infirmities of others and make them impatiently commit themselves. A like purpose is served by the Alsatian French of the banker Nucingen. The whole speech of such a woman of the people as Madame Cibot is redolent of character, as is the boisterous lingo of such a drummer as Gaudissart, a type which Balzac particularly affected.

<sup>1</sup> F. Baldensperger, *Etudes d'histoire littéraire*, II, 1910.

The frank direct soldier type is another of his favorites. This kind is thoroughly harmonized, whether his name be Hulot, Chabert, or Genestas, and his language is always illuminating. It is picturesque and figurative, and the figures of speech, as also with Balzac's peasants, are suitable to the calling concerned. In *Les Chouans*, the slang of the soldiers abounds in animal metaphors, of which there is a deliberate accumulation.

The careers of most characters, it has already been suggested, will issue logically from the preliminary data. François Birotteau, that lightweight of Tours, is introduced to us in terms of his small material preoccupations, and his rise and fall depend wholly upon the coupling of these with his family trait of naïveté. Michu and Nanon are carefully prepared as specimens of faithful service; the rest of their fictional existence is, in each case, one long devotion. Cousin Bette fulfils the requirements of her nature as a revengeful peasant, and Rubempré those of his education as a spoiled youth.

A character in action is of course an essential part of the plot and the two in alliance furnish the best examples of the cumulative process. Tap upon tap the Balzacian plot is driven to its conclusion, which is often enforced by a last resounding blow, a final turn of the screw. The "taps" are variously expressed: by accretion of character items, by significant *mots de caractère* or pregnant sayings, by the piling up of deeds, of money, of people. Such architectonics can also be seen in part of a plot, for example, a busy day of César Birotteau or of Lucien de Rubempré, where enterprises, financial or Bohemian, are pyramided through dealings with an Indian file of people. But the most striking cases are those where Balzac uses throughout a story either a monomaniac character or a plot of martyrdom.

To take the monomaniacs first, these supermen or "monsters" have incurred much critical comment, and Taine gives a list which comprises Claës, the Baron Hulot, Grandet, Goriot, Frenhofer, Gambara, etc. What has been less noted is the way in which every ruling passion piles up its manifestations to what seems almost an impossible height. Take for instance the miser Grandet. Apart from the exposition which catalogues every phase of his background and personality, apart from the fact that the women are mainly



recorded as reflections of the plethora of his power, one may, in the more vital action, select a series of "taps," deliberately driving home the iron nail that is Grandet.

The first might be the salient trait of his "atrocious" and inoperative pity for Nanon. The second is where he warns Cruchot about selling his wine, "in a tone which made the President shudder." The horror of his heartlessness increases through the scene where, with a banal remark, he carefully folds up the letter telling of his brother's suicide. A newspaper account of this is submitted to him, and he freezes Cruchot again by saying that he already knew about it. Madame Grandet pities Charles, the suicide's son, and cries: "The poor young man!" "Yes, poor," says Old Grandet, "he hasn't a cent." This is almost à *mot de caractère* and clearly we have that device in the next hard tap where the miser tells Charles that death is nothing, disgrace is nothing, the important thing is that "you are without money"—and then mutters to Eugénie: "Ce jeune homme n'est bon à rien, il s'occupe plus des morts que de l'argent."

Eugénie is horrified and begins to judge her father from that moment; this illustrates the favorite *procédé* of emphasizing a tap by its effect. Grandet presently blasphemes against the "bon Dieu" of his wife. He makes an outrageous scene when he learns that Eugénie has parted with her gold. When Madame Grandet is at death's door, her husband wants to know what the drugs will cost. His own death, as often, displays the ruling passion with the effect that I have termed the last turn of the screw. One seems to have reached the limit and yet an added grimness is attained when Grandet avariciously clutches at his bed covering and tries, in extreme unction, to seize the gilded crucifix of the priest. Truly as he had told Eugénie, "la vie est une affaire."

A similar wringing of the last drop from death scenes is to be found in the finish of nearly all Balzac's martyrs. Deathbeds are frequently the *dénouements* in this essentially dramatic progression.

Plots that pile up the money interest are, of course, common enough. *César Birotteau* is one of the most symmetrical illustrations, since the growing expenses of that hero's *grandeur* are closely paralleled by the successive discomfitures, particularly the presentation of bills, in his *décadence*. This rise-and-fall plot, by the way, is found in

Balzac since the early *Scènes de la vie privée*. A financial case more nearly allied with the development of character is that of Balthazar Claës in the *Recherche de l'absolu*.

Claës is a monomaniac, though not of the baser sort. He is a monomaniac of genius, like Gambara the musician and Frenhofer the artist. Whether excesses spring from genius or vice, observes Balzac, the effect on one's family is much the same, and that is what Balthazar's search for the chemical absolute is made to illustrate. It is scarcely necessary to set down the taps in detail. They begin with the savant's fits of absent-mindedness, which suggest his keynote; they take form in an increasing neglect of his family, of which the crowning instance and the great *mot* is his reproach to his half-killed wife—"I was about to decompose nitrogen"; they are made financially concrete by the mention, bill after bill, of what his chemistry cost him—and these taps are really the vertebrae of the plot; finally the deterioration of his physique, his character, and his household are marked by similar and corresponding stages.

Baron Hulot and Cousin Pons are also monomaniacs; the book named after the last character portrays in fact an army of types, each obsessed by his or her fixed idea. The taps by which the action develops take the form of fresh alignments of people, a series of mistresses for Baron Hulot, of persecutors for Cousin Pons. The latter, when he calls at Madame Camusot's house, is badly treated by that lady, by her daughter, by her companions, and by her servants. When he meets his superior relatives on the boulevards, he is cut or berated by one after another. Taking to bed as a consequence of this, he is assailed by the prowling jackals of the quarter—*concierge*, shyster, doctor, Jew—who are presented *seriatim*, then in combined attack.

*La Peau de chagrin* furnishes an obvious example of concrete taps, since the plot concerns the shrinking of the talisman every time its possessor makes a wish. He too is a kind of excessive superman, for his repeated keynote is an imperious imagination, romantic and voluptuous. The turn of the screw here is a loathly struggle between love and death. The character of Rastignac, in *Le Père Goriot*, also develops concretely from his initial description as an ambitious Méridional. Thereafter his social rise is given in stages of

money, luxury, dress, carriages, women of fashion. One may count some forty distinct moves in the game, concluding with Rastignac's melodramatic defiance to Paris from the tomb of Goriot. His passionate pride impels him over each difficulty and the gloomy background of the *pension* sets off his successes. On the other hand, Goriot's repeated losses and donations of money, corresponding with his physical break-up and his "hard mounting of other people's stairs"—even to the garret—are in fact so many regular steps downward.

His case brings us to a consideration of the plots of martyrdom. This kind is complicated with the type of the conspiracy-novel, a frequent Balzacian form. The persecution of Cousin Pons, as already outlined, is a capital instance. Others are found in *Le Curé de Tours*, *Pierrette*, and *Le Colonel Chabert*. Martyrs mainly self-impelled are Goriot, Véronique in *Le Curé de village*, and Madame de Mortsauf in *Le Lys dans la vallée*. In nearly all the above, the suffering victim is done to death by successive people or circumstances, plus temperament, and the actual deaths are vividly detailed as so many turns of the screw for final effect. *Pierrette* may be cited as a very complete and typical case.

In this story, Balzac himself skeletonizes for us the three main phases in the victimizing of the girl: the first months of her stay with her mean relatives, who are keynoted as mechanical people with an ugly acquisitiveness; the era of small persecutions and restrictions; the final phase of active physical and moral torture, culminating with her death. The teapot-tempest intrigues of the village work toward the same martyrizing end. The whole plot, item after item, amounts to a search for instances of persecution. Finally, *Pierrette* is actually disinterred in order that the autopsy may establish the nature of her wounds and justify her relatives.

A Balzacian plot is not always of this simple character, but more often than not it is a question of repeated blows in one or more directions. The plot may be double, as in the rise-and-fall type already mentioned, or as in the conflict type. In the latter case—*Les Chouans*, *Le Lys dans la vallée*—there will be rival interests, each of which demands its detailed exploitation.

In the principal elements of his fiction, then—detail, description, characterization, plot—it is seen that Balzac, as a rule, accumulates

and co-ordinates, from a given point, along a given line. His clumsy style shows the effect of this accumulation; the tripartite sentence is not infrequent and the habit of amassing details produces at times almost a Rabelaisian catalogue effect.

The further question is: Does a like accumulation appear in the wider aspects of his work—his sociology and his general ideas? Here the field is too broad to allow more than a few general hints.

It is evident that, according to his manifesto in the *Avant-propos*, he intends to be the "secretary of society," which he holds to consist of "men, women, *and things*." That his attention to things, materialistic as it may be, is often an organic part of his work has been sufficiently stressed. Hence obviously a large part of his descriptions of furniture, costumes, places: they are harmonized around a common keynote. But material objects are also developed for their own sake. Hence the importance given to things as pivots in the plot: the costume of Rastignac or of Vandenesse, the crucifix in *La grande Bretèche*, the musical instruments of Gambara, the fan as a symbol of the great lady. In love affairs, flowers are emphasized as the material symbol, and the collection of Cousin Pons is made a protagonist in the drama, in a manner recalling Hugo's vivification of Notre-Dame, Zola's pet procedure, and Hardy's Egdon Heath.

The men and women, forming the rest of society, are largely distributed into types. What Balzac thought his great discovery, though Diderot partly anticipated him, was that humanity, like animal zoölogy, has its species, divisible according to profession and habitat. A consideration merely of his titles will show that some thirty stories are announced as sociological studies—*Etudes de mœurs*, as he called them. Such titles indicate either a social category, a social institution or a social stage, and they may be divided into these three groups. In the first group may be listed: *La Femme de trente ans*, *Le Curé de village*, *Le Médecin de campagne*, *Les Parents pauvres*; in the second, *Le Bal de Sceaux*, *Le Contrat de mariage*, *Le Cabinet des antiques*, *La Maison Nucingen*; in the third, *Un Début dans la vie*, *Mémoires de deux jeunes mariées*, etc.

Each of these stories largely fulfils the promise of its title and furthermore many others might be given similar titles: for instance, *La Maison Claës*, *La Maison Vauquer*, and perhaps even *La Maison*

*Grandet*. It will readily be seen that Balzac is primarily occupied with classes of society, as Molière was before him. If it be asked whether this French tendency to universalize hurts the individualities of the *Comédie humaine*, I think the answer will generally be in the negative. They are too thoroughly worked out, in both directions, for any such weakness. The miser type appears in *Grandet*, *Gobseck*, *Graslin*, etc., but surely *Grandet* and *Gobseck* are none the less individual. There are several individual old maids, but they agree in certain common marks of the type, and the type, as seen by many side remarks, is Balzac's constant preoccupation.

Finally, in the realm of general ideas, how does this writer collect and master his world? There are three main ideals which he is continually applying: the family, the monarchy, and the church. The early *Scènes de la vie privée* chiefly record the romances and misfortunes of young people who leave the parental wing and go out of their class to marry. The decay of the monarchy is in Balzac's mind the cause of much latter-day mediocrity and confusion. The church is still the center of morality and spirituality. His modern *Inferno*, curiously enough, was still to be dominated by the ruling ideas of Dante's; and enough has been suggested to indicate that Balzac's shaping mind sought to impose an order, not infrequently artificial, upon his naturalistic chaos.

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[*To be continued*]